

**Testimony of Melissa Spear**  
**Executive Director of Common Ground**  
**358 Springside Avenue, New Haven, CT 06515**  
**Submitted to the Legislative Appropriations Committee**  
**March 24, 2011**

Honorable Chair Toni Harp, Honorable Chair Toni Walker, Members of the Appropriations Committee;

I am Melissa Spear, Executive Director of the New Haven Ecology Project, Inc., the non-profit organization that in 1997 established Common Ground High School, a public charter school under Connecticut's enabling Charter School legislation. I am here today to testify in support of Senate Bill #1195: An Act Concerning School Finance Reform.

First let me thank you for raising Senate Bill 1195 and allowing me and others to testify on its behalf here today. As this Committee considers the merits of SB 1195, I ask you to please also consider the hard choices that Common Ground, and all of our state's charter schools, are being forced to make every year as a result of the funding inequity inherent to Connecticut's public school funding system - and the real impact that these choices are having on our students.

At Common Ground, as at many Connecticut charter schools, our students have made extraordinary strides despite extraordinarily limited available resources. While our colleagues at New Haven Public Schools spend more than \$14,000 per year per student, we start with the baseline of \$9,300 from the State Department of Education. Even taking into account Title I funding from the Federal government and the private funds we are able to raise as a charter school, we have \$3,000 less to spend per student on educational needs than other public schools in New Haven. And yet, despite this enormous disadvantage, our students have made remarkable progress:

- In 2008, the percentage of our student scoring "proficient" doubled or nearly doubled in literally every subject area – increasing from 32% to 77% in reading, for instance.
- In 2009, we sustained these gains in every subject area, and gained an additional 10 points in science and math. As a result, Common Ground was the state's only high school to exit No Child Left Behind "in need of improvement" status in either 2008 or 2009.
- In 2010, our students made larger gains than their peers at every other Connecticut high school. In every subject, the percentage of students reaching State Goal either doubled or tripled. We sustained or increased student proficiency levels in every subject, as well. For the first time, Common Ground is outperforming the New Haven average in every subject, and outperforming the state average in reading.

Test score gains are not the only measure of our success. For three straight years, more than 93% of our students have been accepted to college. In the class of 2011, more than a third of our students plan to study environmental sciences or a related field in college. We are doing what we promised in our charter: creating the next generation of successful college students and powerful environmental leaders.

Progress like this is possible because of sustained, above-and-beyond supports we provide our students. Whether you arrive at Common Ground at 6:30 am or 5:00 pm, you will find teachers and students working together to achieve excellence. Walk into our classrooms, and you will see students doing genuinely challenging work, and teachers employing research-based effective teaching strategies, with everything aligned to academic standards.

Despite the progress we have made, we recognize that our work is far from done. Our students need to make even more significant strides. But if our state's charter schools continue to be underfunded, we simply will not be able to continue the progress we have made over the last three years. **OUR STUDENTS DESERVE MORE.**

Here is what we are facing: we are currently deep in the budgeting process for the 2011-12 school year. We have started with what we think we need to meet the most basic needs of our kids. We need to add Calculus, Physics, and AP Literature to the curriculum in order to keep pace with the dramatic educational progress our students have made. To reach students not yet demonstrating proficiency on state standards – and despite a 40% drop in ARRA funding for our after-school program – we need to continue the after-school supports that are critical to our students' success. Our teachers deserve at least a modest raise after two years of salary freezes – they are already paid far less than teachers in the New Haven district. At the same time, the cost of providing health benefits to our staff has increased by 25%. Our state unemployment insurance rates have gone up 40%. Fuel oil prices have risen dramatically. Given all of this, at our current funding level – which has been flat for the last three years – our 2011-2012 budget projects a \$200,000 deficit. As a result, we are now looking at what we can and must cut. Do we provide fewer wrap-around services for our students? Offer fewer challenging courses? Smaller or maybe even no raises for teachers who for years have demonstrated both their commitment and their skill? Or perhaps we invest even less in maintaining our school facility, which is already far more crowded and provides far fewer amenities than other public schools – no library, no gymnasium, no art room, no labs for science, no auditorium. I strongly feel these are NOT choices we should have to make. **OUR STUDENTS DESERVE MORE.**

Here is the bottom line: We spend \$3,000 less per pupil on our students than the New Haven Public Schools and yet we have outperformed them. We are not a failing school; we are a highly successful school. But inadequate funding is slowly eroding our ability to continue to deliver these results – and hurting our kids. Costs have gone up. Funding has not. This cannot go on much longer. At some point, this becomes a simple issue of educational equity. As the Executive Director of Common Ground I simply cannot accept that the education of charter school students – of Common Ground's students – is worth several thousand dollars less than that of their peers at other public schools. Our students are NOT second class citizens. Every student in is entitled to an adequately funded education, and that is what Senate Bill 1195 would provide. Thank you.